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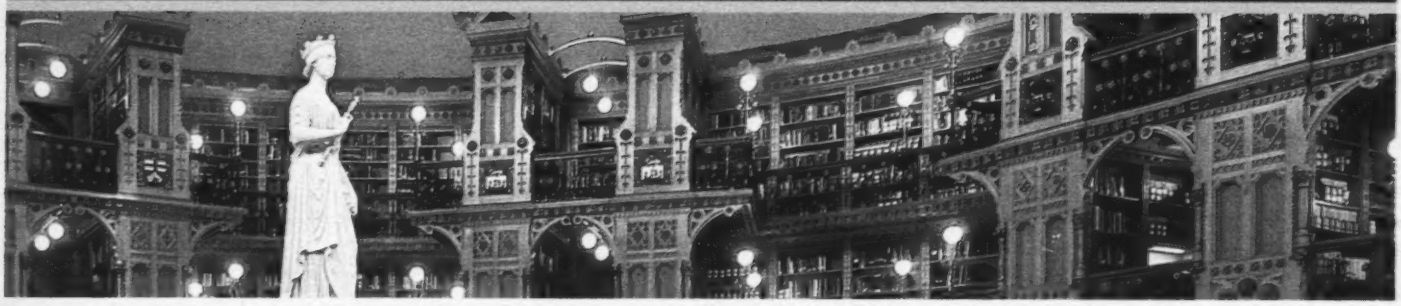

The Role of Parliamentary Secretaries: An Overview

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THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES: AN OVERVIEW

1 INTRODUCTION

Parliamentary secretaries are members of Parliament from the governing party who are appointed by the prime minister to assist Cabinet ministers with their parliamentary duties. Under the direction of these ministers, parliamentary secretaries handle routine matters in the House of Commons, engage in committee work as non-voting members, and assume some extra-parliamentary responsibilities. Thus, parliamentary secretaries act as a link between ministers and other parliamentarians. Some may be given special assignments as well. Moreover, the office can serve as a training ground for future ministers or as a way of rewarding members of the government caucus.

This provides an overview of the role of parliamentary secretaries and how this office has changed over time.

2 THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES

Under the *Parliament of Canada Act*,[1] the number of parliamentary secretaries may not exceed the number of sitting ministers. However, some ministers may not be assigned a parliamentary secretary, while others may be assigned more than one. Parliamentary secretaries are not usually sworn to the Privy Council, although they were under Prime Minister Paul Martin in 2003. In addition, parliamentary secretaries are not bound by Cabinet solidarity or collective responsibility.[2]

Parliamentary secretaries are chosen by the prime minister and carry out their responsibilities as set out by the minister to whom they are assigned.[3] Their initial term of office is no longer than 12 months, although it may be renewed. On top of their salary as members of Parliament, they receive additional remuneration, which is adjusted annually.

Parliamentary secretaries are subject not only to the *Conflict of Interest Act*, in their capacity as public office holders, but also to the *Conflict of Interest Code for Members of the House of Commons*, in their capacity as members of the House of Commons. The Act and the Code are enforced by the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, who is an Officer of Parliament.[4]

According to the *Guide for Parliamentary Secretaries*, the duties of a parliamentary secretary fall under two broad categories: House of Commons business and department-related duties. The guidelines contained in *Open and Accountable Government* state that parliamentary secretaries have House and public duties, and department-related duties.

In the House, parliamentary secretaries help ministers maintain contacts with other parliamentarians. They play a liaison role within the government caucus, particularly on matters regarding private members' business. When the minister is away from the House, parliamentary secretaries may also be called upon to answer policy questions during Question Period.[5]

Under the *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*,[6] parliamentary secretaries may do the following:

- make a statement during the time devoted to "Statements by Members" (whereas ministers may not) (S.O. 30(5));
- table documents in the House on behalf of a minister (S.O. 32(2));
- speak on behalf of a minister during adjournment proceedings (S.O. 38(5));
- act on behalf of a minister during consideration of the main estimates of a department in Committee of the Whole (S.O. 81(4)(a)); and
- speak on behalf of a minister during debate on a motion for the production of papers (S.O. 97(2)).

Because they work under the direction of a minister, however, parliamentary secretaries do not ask questions during Question Period[7] and they are ineligible to introduce their own private member's bills or motions.[8] They may not present government bills, either.[9]

Parliamentary secretaries can be named to standing, special or legislative committees only as non-voting members appointed by the chief government whip.[10] There, they represent the minister's views and address political issues that may arise. They share departmental information and may work with committee chairs to plan appearances of ministers and departmental officials.[11]

With regard to department-related duties, the prime minister may assign parliamentary secretaries specific policy-related priorities. In addition, while overall responsibility and accountability remain with the minister, he or she may delegate specific policy development duties to a parliamentary secretary. As indicated above, parliamentary secretaries also ensure liaison between parliamentary committees and the department.[12]

Parliamentary secretaries may also perform extra-parliamentary duties for the minister by fulfilling speaking engagements, attending ceremonies or meeting delegations.[13]

3 EVOLUTION OF THE OFFICE OF PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY

The first parliamentary secretaries were appointed during the First World War, when Prime Minister Robert Borden appointed three of them to assist heavily burdened ministers. However, with the defeat of the Borden government in 1921, the office lapsed. It was revived during the Second World War, when, in 1943, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King appointed seven "parliamentary assistants," as he referred to them.[14] After the war, King continued to appoint parliamentary assistants on an informal basis, as did his successor, Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent. A number of the parliamentary assistants appointed during this period served for extended periods, and some were subsequently elevated to the ministry.[15]

The appointment of parliamentary secretaries was formalized in 1959 when Parliament passed the *Parliamentary Secretaries Act*, which limited the number of parliamentary secretaries to 16.[16] Like Prime Ministers King and St. Laurent before them, Prime Ministers John Diefenbaker and Lester Pearson often kept parliamentary secretaries in place for several years, and some were elevated to the ministry.[17]

In 1971, the *Parliamentary Secretaries Act* was amended to make the number of parliamentary secretaries correspond to the number of ministers.[18] At the same time, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau indicated that he intended to rotate incumbents at two-year intervals, and he largely kept to that commitment.[19]

Prime Minister Brian Mulroney expanded the number of parliamentary secretaries when he appointed a large number of secretaries of state. He also returned to the earlier practice of reappointing parliamentary secretaries for several years and appointing some to the ministry.[20] In 1985, the *Parliamentary Secretaries Act* was consolidated as part of the *Parliament of Canada Act*.

Also in 1985, the Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons (the McGrath Committee) recommended that parliamentary secretaries be prohibited from being members of standing committees in the area of their responsibility. The Mulroney government initially accepted the recommendation, but in 1991, it lifted the prohibition.[21]

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien revived the practice of replacing parliamentary secretaries every two years. When Paul Martin became prime minister in December 2003, he ended the practice of automatic rotation after a two-year term and assigned parliamentary secretaries specific policy responsibilities. He also appointed parliamentary secretaries to the Privy Council and said they would be invited to Cabinet meetings when a policy matter for which they had specific duties was to be discussed.[22]

In February 2006, Stephen Harper returned to the earlier practice of not appointing parliamentary secretaries to the Privy Council.[23] Prime Minister Justin Trudeau followed suit after forming the government in 2015.[24]

In 2017, the House of Commons amended its Standing Orders to change the roles of parliamentary secretaries and ministers within committees,[25] making it possible as mentioned above for the chief government whip to "appoint Parliamentary Secretaries as non-voting members of any standing, special or legislative committee."[26]

4 CONCLUSION

Parliamentary secretaries play a vital, if often unrecognized, role in assisting Cabinet ministers and providing a link between ministers and parliamentarians. Given that the role of parliamentary secretary is largely defined by the prime minister, the nature of the office has changed over the years. At times, appointments have tended to be lengthy, while at other times, they have been limited to two years. Some prime ministers have used the office as a proving ground for future ministers, while others have used it as a way of giving executive experience to many members of the government party.

Because the office is loosely defined, it is easily adapted to meet the administrative and political needs of the government of the day.

NOTES

1. *Parliament of Canada Act*, R.S.C. 1985, c. P-1, ss. 46–47.
2. Privy Council Office, *Guide for Parliamentary Secretaries*, December 2015, p. 8.
3. Government of Canada, *Open and Accountable Government*, 2015, pp. 5–6.
4. Office of the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner, *Information for Members of the House of Commons*.
5. Government of Canada (2015), p. 6.
6. House of Commons, *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*, Consolidated version as of 18 September 2017.
7. Parliament of Canada, "Chapter 11: Questions," *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, 3rd ed., 2017.
8. House of Commons (2017), *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*, S.O. 87(1)(a)(ii).
9. House of Commons, "Parliamentary Secretary," *Glossary of Parliamentary Procedure*.
10. House of Commons (2017), *Standing Orders of the House of Commons*, S.O. 104(5) and 104(6)(b).
11. Government of Canada (2015), p. 6.
12. Ibid.
13. Privy Council Office (2015), p. 7.
14. David Gamache Hutchison, "Parliamentary Secretaries in the 36th Parliament," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Spring 2000, p. 20.
15. Peter Dobell, "Parliamentary Secretaries: The Consequences of Constant Rotation," *Policy Matters*, Vol. 2, No. 4, September 2001, p. 14.
16. Privy Council Office, *Guide to Canadian Ministries since Confederation*.
17. Dobell (2001), p. 12.
18. Hutchison (2000), p. 21.
19. Dobell (2001), p. 12.
20. Ibid., p. 16.
21. Hutchison (2000), p. 26.
22. Privy Council Office, *Ethics, Responsibility, Accountability: An Action Plan for Democratic Reform*, 2004, p. 10.
23. Government of Canada, "Prime Minister announces Parliamentary Secretaries," News release, 7 February 2006.
24. Government of Canada (2015), p. 60.
25. Parliament of Canada (2017).
26. House of Commons, "Membership," *Compendium of Procedure: Committees*.